

Knives upon a Tightrope

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Knives upon a Tightrope

by [Lost_in_thoughts](#)

Summary

Every now and then, the caravan organizes little competitions. Aiden loves to take part.

Notes

Welcome to another little adventure of the young cats featuring Gaetan, Aiden, a tightrope and some knives. Thanks to @akhuna who came up with the great title.

I hope you all enjoy this little piece!

“There you are!” Aiden flung open the door, stormed into the waggon and threw himself into his hammock, looking down at his best friend.

Sitting cross-legged on his bedroll, Gaetan polished his silver knife. “Yeah. Wanted to be left alone for a while.”

“Alright. But guess what?”

“You came up with another stupid idea.”

“My ideas aren’t stupid!”

“What about that time you talked me into sneaking into the storage room of an inn in Riedbrune?”

Aiden’s eyes lit up. “The Camembert was so tasty! Oh, and remember the Pepper Vodka? Really strong stuff.”

“Mostly remember the inkeep’s dogs chasing us through the city.”

“Come on, we got out of it just fine.”

Gaetan snorted. “Just fine? I scraped my arm, pulled three splinters and tore my shirt as we had to climb over a fucking fence to get away. I was the laughing stock of the caravan for a whole week!”

“Well,” Aiden frowned, brushing a strand of unruly ginger hair from his brow, “it was three days tops. And since when do you give a shit what the others say? I’m glad you joined me. That’s what counts, isn’t it? And to be fair, some of my other ideas have been really good. Remember when we mashed two cabbages and put them into Lexandre’s boots?”

“Ha! Asshole deserved it. Shrieked like a banshee the next morning.” Finally, Gaetan looked up from his knife, the hint of a smirk playing around the corner of his mouth. “And he’s stopped telling that bullshit about how we should be happy for having cabbage to eat ever since.”

“Good for him. So, you wanna hear why I’m here?”

“Won’t leave me alone before telling me anyway. So spit it out already.”

Grinning, Aiden slid out of the hammock and sat down next to Gaetan. “There’ll be another competition!”

Gaetan rolled his eyes and sighed.

“We’ll take part.”

“Why?”

“Because Guxart said the winner will get a bag with treats.”

“As always,” Gaetan muttered. “Honeycombs and nuts, perhaps. Would be different if they gave us good stuff like knives or arrows or anything, but this is bullshit. We’re too old for sweets!”

“Old Tom is like three hundred years old and still likes candied fruits.”

“Because he’s as senile as you’re childish. For fuck’s sake, Aiden.”

“I like Old Tom. Besides, you haven’t complained about the chicken legs we got last time.”

The annoyed snort was a good sign. At least, his best friend hadn’t declined right away. Aiden let himself flop onto his back. “Wanna hear the plan for our performance?”

“Guess I don’t have a choice.”

“We’ll stretch a rope across the old watchtower and-”

“Hope we don’t die.”

“We’ll juggle. With knives.”

Gaetan narrowed his eyes and stared at him. “You’re absolutely fucking mad! The Grasses really have destroyed whatever few brain cells you had left.”

“Why? This is a great idea!”

“This is bullshit! Don’t know if you haven’t got the notice, but this is a witcher school, not a fucking travelling circus!”

He decided to ignore Gaetan’s insults. He didn’t mean it, not really. And if he wanted him to join, it was wiser to avoid a fight. He had to try and convince him. Sometimes, it even worked.

“We both know that we have to impress the mentors to win. Plus, the competition won’t take place before the next full moon, so we’ll have all the time in the world to practice.”

After an eternity where Gaetan just sat and aggressively polished his knife, he finally shook his head. “Don’t know why I’m doing this,” he muttered.

“Because we’re friends.” Aiden beamed at him, triumph written all over his face. Gaetan loved to nag, bitch and moan about everything, but in the end, he would never let his best friend down.

“If you want it to stay that way fuck off now. And you owe me. Big time.”

“Love you, too.” Aiden laughed as he got up, dodged the half-heartedly thrown knife and ran out of the waggon.

The next two weeks turned out to be far more difficult than the talk with Gaetan. Maybe Aiden's plans for their performance were a little too ambitious to realize in between their daily chores, lessons and training. On the other hand, they had survived the Grasses just fine, so the only thing that could stop them was themselves. At least this was what he told Gaetan in a try to keep him entertained. It didn't work.

The other, very real thing that could indeed stop them was death. Spanning a tightrope above the watchtower of the old castle ruin where they had made camp several days ago had taken them almost a whole evening. Worse, Gaetan had slipped. He would have definitely not survived the fall, the watchtower stood at least 30 feet high. Thanks to Aiden's heightened reflexes, he had managed to grab his friend's hand just in time. He had paid for it with a huge tear in his trousers and scraped thighs, but the stinging hurt and the annoying task of stitching up his trousers had been ten times better than the alternative, though.

That incident didn't raise Gaetan's mood, not at all. Anyhow, Aiden wouldn't step back from his plan for their performance. He desperately wanted to win that competition and it was too late to come up with another idea. It wasn't so much about getting a treat, if he wanted to have an extra portion of cheese or a cream bun he could always swap it for some extra chores or wait until they went to the next town. The mentors told them not to steal from the townspeople too often, because angry people weren't good trading partners, but people only got angry if they caught you.

No, the real reason he wanted to win as many competitions as possible was the disgust on Brehen's face if none of his kittens managed to win and the encouraging clap on the shoulder the winner was getting from Grandmaster Guxart. If Gaetan knew about this, he would roll his eyes and call Aiden a teacher's pet and a wimp. But in Aiden's book, there was nothing wrong with wanting to be liked.

Gaetan's prickly behaviour was mostly a facade, anyhow.

A very solid facade, though. On top of Gaetan's constant sulking, his stance on the rope was lousy and he juggled so badly that Aiden suspected he let the knives fall on purpose. Of course it was Aiden's task to pick them up from the ground every time, because it was his performance, after all.

His motivation got better when Aiden took on the kitchen duties and smuggled leftovers into their sleeping waggon whenever possible, though. It was dangerous, but risking punishment was better than enduring Gaetan's bad mood.

The night of the competition came way too early nevertheless. Aiden didn't feel well-prepared. He was tired and anxious and somehow, every performance seemed to be better than what he and Gaetan had in store.

Lilesha and Grini, a dwarf girl who would leave for the path next spring, performed a fight with burning daggers.

Kiyan showed his abilities with a crossbow, striking targets made of straw Dragonfly, a full-fledged witcher, threw to him. He managed to hit every single one exactly in the centre.

Ymir, a boy from Grini's cohort who had been brought to the caravan by Brehen had managed to capture a small nekker and let it dance around the old castle ruin using Axii.

And finally, the twins Mick and Jira had prepared fireworks.

"No fucking way we'll win this," Gaetan muttered as the last red and blue shots faded in the night air.

"Of course we'll win." Aiden didn't feel like it, but he wouldn't give up now.

No matter how afraid you are, you have to keep going. That was what Guxart always told them, and as the school's grandmaster, he should know how things worked.

"And now, Aiden and Gaetan will show us a special performance on the tightrope," Guxart announced with his clear and loud voice, visibly enjoying the competition.

With a smile that was as broad as always and only a little shaking, Aiden turned to Gaetan. "Up we go."

In the end, his anxiety and fear had been needless. Once on the rope, his thoughts quietened. His body knew exactly what to do. Gaetan didn't let any knives fall and none of them tripped. As both of them jumped from the tightrope with a somersault and, under loud applause, landed onto the still somewhat intact intermediate floor of the watchtower, he saw Gaetan smile at him. Together, they jumped down to the floor and ran to the other contestants, their hair messy, their eyes kept on Guxart, who was discussing with the other mentors.

Finally, the Grandmaster turned around, a well-filled bag in his hands and amusement in his eyes. "Thanks to all of you, the competition was very entertaining. Ymir, I can't fathom where you found that nekker, but the performance was quite impressive."

The boy smirked and bowed his head.

"Nevertheless, you will get rid of it before any of the children get scared. Or worse, want to ride on it." Under loud laughter, Ymir unsheathed his sword and beheaded the still-dazed monster. A few of the younger children gasped. Gaetan snorted.

"Mick and Jira, I am sure your fireworks were loud enough they could be heard in Novigrad. Well done." The twins nodded at each other, grinning.

"Kiyan, not only are you one of the best lockpickers of the caravan but a great shot, too."

"I know." Laughing, he dodged the straw target Dragonfly threw at him.

"Grini and Lilesa, you're living proof that playing with fire can indeed be a lot of fun." Both girls nodded eagerly.

Guxart took a deep sigh. "Aiden and Gaetan...if you think we'd accept your little stroll as equivalent for your final trial, you're both wrong."

The whole caravan laughed as he continued. “And I want to make one thing crystal clear, none of you will get extra points if someone dies in your performance.”

The laughter got louder and some of the mentors whistled as Guxart darted Aiden a piercing glance that made him swallow. “This was an absolutely mad performance, you two. It was dangerous and reckless.”

“Everybody knows we’re mad, Gux!” Dragonfly shouted, raising a bottle of Mahakam Spirit at the Grandmaster.

“Everybody *thinks* we’re mad, Dragonfly. That’s a difference.” Suddenly, Guxart smiled, shaking his head. “Alas, I do have to admit that your performance was without a doubt the best.”

Aiden couldn’t help smiling. As he looked at Gaetan, his best friend gave him a smug grin.

“Ymir caught a nekker and tamed it with Axii. This is much more impressive than the nonsense these rascals came up with!” Brehen shouted from his place at the fire.

“Shut up, Brehen. Nobody likes sore losers,” Cedric, a young witcher with only a few years of experience on the path, yelled.

Some applauded him, some yelled, and before Aiden could really grasp the whole situation, Brehen and Cedric were on the ground fighting. Some witchers build a circle around them and cheered them on, the younger children ran to their sleeping waggon, followed by the older ones who grabbed a few snacks and a bottle of mead first. The other contestants followed, too. Now that they knew they wouldn’t get a prize there was nothing interesting to stay for anymore.

Guxart sighed, patting first Aiden’s, then Gaetan’s shoulder. “Very well done, you two. But I’m afraid I have to intervene before these two kill each other.” With a nod, he gave the bag to Gaetan and went over to the fire. At least six witchers were now fighting, a mass of flying fists and kicking boots.

Rolling his eyes and grinning, Gaetan gave Aiden a little push and ran to their waggon. As both of them sat down on Gaetan’s bedroll, curiously eyed by the other aspirants, Schrödinger turned up and sat down next to Aiden.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Gaetan asked, opening the bag, not even looking at them.

“Just where I needed to be. The juggling was a good idea, Aiden.”

Aiden beamed at them. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, and I was the one to make the difficult juggling tricks. All that for,” Gaetan upended the bag and shook the contents onto his bedroll, “two pieces of cheese, grapes, three cream buns and candied ginger.”

“And the Gwent card of Vernossiel,” Schrödinger chimed in, holding the card nobody had seen them take in their hand.

Aiden looked at it, his eyes wide with awe. “This one’s really rare.”

“And it’s mine,” Gaetan said with a self-satisfied grin, snatching the card from Schrödinger’s fingers.

“But-”

“You owe me. Big time, remember?”

Aiden sighed. He loved Gwent, they all did. And when you weren’t already on the path there weren’t many opportunities to polish up your deck. But in the end, the card didn’t matter. He had had a great evening with Gaetan and the others, Guxart had been proud of him and they had won enough cheese and sweets to fill his belly and share with the smaller children. And if it only took a Gwent card to make Gaetan happy it was a price Aiden was more than willing to pay.

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